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Torch: The Civil Rights Team Project Newsletter

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## Torch (September/October 2011)

Brandon Baldwin

Civil Rights Team Project

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# THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) SEPT./OCT. '11



Ahh... the much-anticipated 2011-2012 school year. We have great things in store for you with the Civil Rights Team Project. We encourage you to get your team up and running as soon as possible. Get established!

You can look forward to the fall trainings, too. Check your school mail for registration materials.

Here's what you can expect in this month's newsletter:

**Team Spotlight:** No teams in the spotlight just yet... but that will change.

**Activity Ideas:** Two activities! The first asks team members to think about bystander behavior in a personal way. The second is the annual event of Mix It Up at Lunch Day.

**Talking to Myself:** A new addition to our newsletter featuring me talking with myself about important civil rights issues. It's better than it sounds. Really.

**Pop Culture Winners and Losers:** A whole summer of pop culture to review!

**Relevant Resources:** The beginning of the school year is the perfect time to review how policies and practices can help create a safe learning environment in your school.

Brandon Baldwin – Newsletter Editor, reachable at [brandon.baldwin@maine.gov](mailto:brandon.baldwin@maine.gov)

*This newsletter is written and distributed by the Civil Rights Team Project, a state-wide program under the auspices of the Maine Office of the Attorney General. The mission of the Civil Rights Team Project is to increase the safety of high school, middle school and elementary school students and to reduce the incidence of bias-motivated harassment and violence in schools.*

**Bill Schneider—Attorney General**

**Debi Lettre—Civil Rights Project Administrator**

**Brandon Baldwin—Schools/Curriculum Coordinator**



## Team Spotlight:



This is the most valuable section of *The Torch*. It highlights projects and activities that civil rights teams have done. A good part of this newsletter is theory and philosophy; even when it's practical, it's about things you *could* do.

But the Team Spotlight is about things that teams have *already done*. It's about *action*. It's about you and your teams.

And it's about time to get it started. The Team Spotlight is understandably dim right now, but when the next *Torch* newsletter comes out in November, this space should be filled with civil rights team projects and activities. For that to happen, we need communication.

Please keep me informed about what your civil rights team is doing. Not everything you tell me will end up in the pages of *The Torch*, but it's worth sharing nonetheless. Right now, a simple message might be best...

I want to know!

## Activity Ideas: Bystanders and Mixing It Up

This is a very simple activity that can effectively frame the purpose of the civil rights team in your school. It's inspired by the work of Jackson Katz and his ongoing efforts to get men to take responsibility for a culture that allows violence against women.

Here we will slightly modify it so that it's relevant for you and your civil rights teams. I will simply give you a series of questions you can use with your team. Individual responses work best.

With your students, then...

1. Think of someone you love and care about very much.



# THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) SEPT./OCT. '11

2. Now imagine that this person is being harmed by someone else. How do you feel towards this person who is doing harm to someone you love and care about very much?
3. Now imagine that there's someone else who could do something to help the person you love and care about. For whatever reason, this person chooses to do nothing. How do you feel towards this person?
4. Now imagine that instead of doing nothing, this person chooses to do something. How do you feel towards this person now?
5. What does this have to do with civil rights teams?
6. How can we, as a civil rights team, be like the person who chooses to do something to help those who are being harmed?

That's it! It's a simple conversation starter that personalizes the issue of bystander behavior.

And the role of civil rights teams? The simple answer is that civil rights teams organized around the principle of speaking out against the harm that comes from bias behaviors. Since it's the beginning of the school year, let's keep it that simple.

\* \* \* \* \*

In last June's *Torch*, I highlighted Teaching Tolerance's annual Mix It Up at Lunch event. It will be earlier than usual: October 18. Mix It Up at Lunch Day is a great civil rights team initiative, as it encourages schools to break down social barriers.

If your civil rights team gets its act together early, your school can celebrate this event on October 18 with support from the Civil Rights Team Project. I am making myself available for assemblies to promote this event, encouraging students to participate.

Of course your school can schedule a Mix It Up event anytime, but there's something symbolic and powerful about joining other schools all across the country in celebrating the official date on October 18. If you'd like an assembly to support your civil rights team and school in this venture, fill out the form and send it in. Where is the form? It's attached to the same e-mail that included this *Torch* newsletter. You'll need to include the civil rights team and your school administration in this process, but it's entirely manageable and worth it in making Mix It Up Day a big event.

For more information on this event, check out:

[www.tolerance.org/mix-it-up?newsletter=TT050411](http://www.tolerance.org/mix-it-up?newsletter=TT050411)



## Talking to Myself: Summer Movies

Welcome to the newest feature in *The Torch* newsletter, where I take on another identity and then have a conversation with my real self. That might sound dangerously unhealthy, but it's a great way to address a topic in an informal but in-depth manner.

This month, I talk to Hollywood about gender and *The Smurfs*... I have my reasons!

\* \* \* \* \*

Me: Thanks for agreeing to sit down with me. I have to admit... I'm a bit surprised.

Hollywood: Yeah. You really went to town on me a few years ago at the fall trainings.

Me: I did... but only because I love movies. It was tough love from someone who wants to see a little more diversity on the screen.

Hollywood: OK. How was it received?

Me: Well... I think it made a lot of people uncomfortable. I just hope it made them think more. I hope that whenever a movie comes out now, they ask themselves some basic questions about who it's about and who is telling the story. Which leads us to...

Hollywood: Uh-oh.

Me: Yup. The summer of 2011. Let's talk about a few films, starting with *The Smurfs*.

Hollywood: Sure! Didn't you love it? Something from your childhood, right?

Me: I think it's the last thing from my childhood that you haven't recycled into a movie, actually. Unless you count Legos and Playmobile.

Hollywood: Oh! Great idea!

Me: Anyway... I want to talk to you about gender in *The Smurfs*. I couldn't help but notice that there was only one female smurf.

Hollywood: Yes! Smurfette, voiced by singing sensation Katy Perry. We're pretty happy with the gender diversity in the film. Male and female!

Me: Right. So in the whole movie, there are how many female smurfs?



# THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) SEPT./OCT. '11

Hollywood: Smurfette.

Me: So... one. And for the sake of comparison... how many male smurfs?

Hollywood: Let's see. There's Papa, Brainy, Gutsy, Clumsy, Grouchy, Handy, Jokey, Hefty, Vanity, Greedy, Panicky, Baker, Chef, and Crazy. So that's...

Me: Fourteen. Fourteen male smurfs and one female smurf.

Hollywood: Gender diversity! Male and female smurfs!

Me: But doesn't that seem a little lopsided?

Hollywood: Maybe. But it's all based on the tv show. There was only one female smurf on the tv show, so we had to keep it that way. We're honoring the source.

Me: But you created three new smurf characters for the movie that were never in the tv show. All three of them are male. You could have created new female characters.

Hollywood: We're just trying to stay true to the material.

Me: I get that. But you're not doing a historical reenactment. This isn't based on a true story. It's about made up little blue creatures... and you're worried about staying true to the source?

Hollywood: (Silence)

Me: Let's talk more about the Smurfette character. Where did she get her name?

Hollywood: Because she's a female smurf.

Me: Right. All the other smurfs get names based on their personalities or their talents and interests. So their name sort of defines who they are.

Hollywood: Yes! And we've got all kinds of different smurfs!

Me: So the name defines them. That means Smurfette is defined by her gender. She's the "smurf chick." That's it.

Hollywood: No! Look at her. She gets her own style.

Me: She gets blonde hair, a dress, and a pair of heels. Like I said: she's "chick smurf."

Hollywood: What is your problem, anyway? It's just a kids' movie.



# THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) SEPT./OCT. '11

Me: Well, what about all the young girls who see this movie? They get one female character they can identify with, and the message they get from that character is that they're girls, and that's what matters most. That and looking pretty. It's not about who they are, what they like, what they want to be... it's about how they look.

Hollywood: Oh, come on. It's just one movie.

Me: But it's not. Most of your movies are about men. Of the top 20 grossing films this year, how many do you think feature a female main character?

Hollywood: Half?

Me: Not quite. Try one. *Bridesmaids*. Other than that, all of the top films of 2011 are about boys and men.

Hollywood: But there are female characters in those movies...

Me: Well, duh. Of course there are. But they are supporting characters, side characters, minor characters. And they're outnumbered, just like poor Smurfette in *The Smurfs*.

Hollywood: But what about *Bridesmaids*?

Me: The exception proves the rule. You come up with one movie and you think it makes up for all the others? I don't think so. Let's not be self-congratulatory over one movie.

Hollywood: Well, we can't help it. We make movies with female leads, and no one wants to go and see them. We need to make money.

Me: I don't totally disagree with you. Maybe you are giving the people what they want, in which case, the people deserve some of the blame. And you are a business, and you certainly have a right to make money. But you also shape people's tastes, and sadly, I just don't think that you're trying very hard to create any sort of gender diversity or equity on the big screen.

Hollywood: Well, you're just too negative. Nothing is good enough for you.

Me: Actually, in the last year I've seen some signs of encouragement. You seem to be more willing to create action films with female leads. There was *Salt* with Angelina Jolie in a role that originally supposed to go to Tom Cruise. This summer there was *Hannah* with Cate Blanchette. And the previews for *Columbiana* have me pretty excited; not only do we have a female lead in Zoe Saldana, but some welcome racial diversity, too.

Hollywood: Oh, speaking of that! What about *The Help*?



# THE TORCH

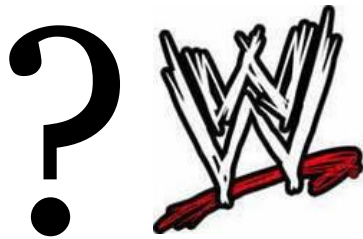
(CRTP NEWSLETTER) SEPT./OCT. '11

Me: Trust me when I say that you don't want to talk to me about race in Hollywood films. That's another interview. For now, just go read this piece by Matt Zolar Seitz for *Salon*, where he calls *The Help* "a white liberal fantasy in historical drag."

[www.salon.com/entertainment/movies/feature/2011/08/12/why\\_hollywood\\_keeps\\_white\\_washing\\_the\\_past/index.html](http://www.salon.com/entertainment/movies/feature/2011/08/12/why_hollywood_keeps_white_washing_the_past/index.html)

## Pop Culture Watch: Summer 2011

**The Pop Culture Watch is where we offer our opinions on what's going on in popular culture from a civil rights perspective!**



### **A Good Message Gets Bodyslammed by the Messenger**

World Wrestling Entertainment and the Creative Coalition announced the official launch of "be a STAR," a multi-platform, nationwide anti-bullying alliance. Their stated mission:

The mission of "be a STAR" —which stands for 'Show Tolerance And Respect'—is to ensure a positive and equitable social environment for everyone regardless of age, race, religion or sexual orientation through grassroots efforts beginning with education and awareness. "be a STAR" will promote positive methods of social interaction and encourage people to treat others as equals and with respect because everyone is a star in their own right.

The alliance includes the National Education Association and the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. Their first initiative is a free anti-bullying curricula.

This sounds great... but an anti-bullying program featuring World Wrestling Entertainment? *Really?* It's important that we embrace positive messages like the "be a STAR" message wherever they come from. It's important that we allow individuals and institutions the opportunity to grow and change. It's important that we meet people where they're at.





# THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) SEPT./OCT. '11

But WWE is notorious for homophobia, gender stereotypes, and especially violence against women. I just watched a YouTube montage of WWE action including a very large man repeatedly beating a woman with a metal chair.

Just remember: World Wrestling Entertainment is against bullying. Only in “real” life, apparently.

You can see the alliance and their work at:

[www.beaSTARalliance.org](http://www.beaSTARalliance.org)



## Oh, Enough Already

The television networks have officially leaked information about their upcoming fall schedules and new series. ABC is featuring the following new comedies:

1. *Work It*: “This high-concept comedy centers on two unrepentant guy’s guys who, unable to find work, dress as women to get jobs as pharmaceutical reps. Not only do they pull it off, but they might just learn to be better men in the process.”
2. *Man Up*: “Three modern men try to get in touch with their inner tough guys and redefine what it means to be a ‘real man’ in this funny and relatable comedy.”
3. *Last Man Standing*: “Today it’s a woman’s world, and this man’s man is on a mission to get men back to their rightful place in society.”

Ordinarily I don’t feel completely comfortable offering commentary on a television show before it has even aired. ABC’s comedy lineup, however, is part of an ongoing trend in pop culture that assumes that American masculinity is somehow under assault. The repeated joke, then, becomes men doing things that aren’t considered masculine.

Not only is that joke tired, but I’m sick of being told what it means to be a man.



## A Pop Culture Question More Should Ask: WHY NOT?

Marvel Comics recently brought some diversity into the notoriously white world of comics when they revealed a new face behind the Spider Man mask: half-black, half-Latino Miles Morales.

Now don't go around saying that Spider Man is now black. It's much more complicated than that. We don't need to get into all the details here, mostly because it's not that important, but also because I don't understand them. We'll just say that Marvel works multiple story lines in multiple imagined universes. The white Peter Parker is still Spider Man, and probably always will be.

But the fact that Marvel also imagines a world where Spider Man is a half-black, half-Latino guy named Miles Morales is a good thing. Because... why not? If they can create a character who gains superhuman powers after getting bitten by a radioactive spider, why can't they change a character's background or race?

Here's the historic moment, from Marvel's *Ultimate Comics Fallout* #4:





# THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) SEPT./OCT. '11



## Music as Social Activism

Rise Against has partnered with the “It Gets Better” Project to create a moving music video for their song “Make It Stop.” The video shows the damaging influence and effects of anti-LGBT bullying in our schools. I’ll let the video speak for itself.

Popular band + social activism + growing movement = excellent pop culture moment!

(And bonus points for the racial diversity reflected in the video!)

Your students have probably already seen this. You should, too, at:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=XP4clbHc4Xg&feature=pyv](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XP4clbHc4Xg&feature=pyv)



## OK... It’s a Pattern

I was tempted earlier this year to write about DirecTV’s television commercials featuring a very, very rich Russian speaking in somewhat broken English about how he loves his DirecTV. (You may know these ads as the ones featuring a miniature giraffe.) Some of the humor seemed to be based on the fact that he was Russian, but I decided to let it slide. It wasn’t quite blatant enough to warrant comment.

But now DirecTV has created other ads in the series. There’s one with a black boxer named “The Truth” and another with an Asian mogul named “The Whale.” All of the ads ridicule their spokesmen characters and include subtle ethnic and racial stereotypes. Each individual ad isn’t so bad, but taken as a group, you have to wonder what DirecTV is thinking.

(Interesting sidenote: the ad featuring “The Truth” has been pulled from tv amidst complaints of racism. From white people! Viewers complained that the only white character in an entourage of black characters gets punched in the gut.)



# THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) SEPT./OCT. '11

You can see the series of ads at:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vHT6b7u1\\_Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vHT6b7u1_Y)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=ws7I18g6Ko](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ws7I18g6Ko) (lower quality, as it's hard to find online)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFDUOfRXP\\_k&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFDUOfRXP_k&feature=related)



i'm not **RACIST**, but ...

## Exposing Facebook Racism

What a great idea! This anti-racist site is a simple collection of Facebook posts including the words "I'm not racist but..." Those four words are almost always the prelude to some terribly racist comments.

(It's amazing to me how people can be aware of the fact that what they're about to say or write could very well seem racist... and then they go ahead with it anyway. Perhaps a more accurate disclaimer would be "This may be racist, but I'm going to say it anyway.")

There is little in the way of commentary, as the posts are allowed to pretty much speak for themselves.

So how is this a good thing? The site calls out racism and calls it exactly what it is. The posts are exposed for what they are, despite their pathetic disclaimers and couched language. The content is obviously ugly, but I can easily imagine using some of these Facebook posts to help young people understand that racism usually isn't as obvious as the KKK and someone saying "I hate black people."

[www.notracistbut.com](http://www.notracistbut.com)



## Relevant Resources: Practices and Policies



We all know that the beginning of the school year is the time to set the tone for everything and anything that happens between now and June. It's the perfect time to (re)introduce important principles and policies.

The United States Department of Education released a much-publicized "Dear Colleague" letter last October in response to increased scrutiny on schools and their role in addressing issues of bias-based bullying and harassment. Unfortunately, the October release date may have limited its audience and impact; it's a busy time in schools.

This "Dear Colleague" letter is excellent "back to school" reading for civil rights team advisors and school administrators. It appears to be long, but that's deceptive; many of the pages offer examples and scenarios. The meat of the letter is only three pages, and it's well worth your time. It addresses why schools must respond to discriminatory harassment and how these behaviors are different.

You can access this letter at:

[www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.html)

The "Dear Colleague" letter highlights the importance of school policies in addressing issues of bias and discriminatory harassment. At last year's faculty advisor and student trainings, we guided you through your school's harassment policies. Those policies should have a central role in creating a safe school environment.

The beginning of the school year is a great (first) time to share and discuss these policies with staff and students. To help you and your school, then, here is our ten question quiz about school harassment policies. In a perfect world, two things should happen:

1. The correct answer to all ten questions is YES. If so, then your school/district harassment policy is reflecting best practices. If not, we recommend changes.
2. No matter what the correct answers are, every adult in your school should know these answers. If they are all responsible for enforcing the same policy, they should be putting the same answers to all ten questions.

It has been our experience that #1 is rare, and #2 non-existent. This suggests screams that schools need to do a better job in drafting and communicating their harassment policies.



The Maine Department of Education agrees. Here is a quote from a January 2010 memo from then commissioner Susan Gendron, followed by a link for that memo and our harassment policy quiz:

“Schools have a duty to protect students from harassment by establishing and enforcing anti-harassment policies, educating students and staff in the prevention of harassment, modeling appropriate behavior, monitoring student conduct, and responding quickly to harassment when it occurs.”

[www.maine.gov/tools/whatsnew/index.php?topic=edu\\_letters&id=87952&v=article](http://www.maine.gov/tools/whatsnew/index.php?topic=edu_letters&id=87952&v=article)

## School/District Harassment Policy Quiz

- |  |     |    |        |
|--|-----|----|--------|
| 1. Does it include all civil rights categories (race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, physical and mental disability, gender, and sexual orientation)? | yes | no | unsure |
| 2. Does it define harassment behaviors?  | yes | no | unsure |
| 3. Does it include words and speech as harassment?   | yes | no | unsure |
| 4. Does it include reporting protocols and procedures?   | yes | no | unsure |
| 5. Is it in the student handbook?  | yes | no | unsure |
| 6. Is it posted online?  | yes | no | unsure |
| 7. Is it consistent and the same everywhere it appears?  | yes | no | unsure |
| 8. Are teachers trained?   | yes | no | unsure |
| 9. Is it reviewed, explained, and understood?  | yes | no | unsure |
| 10. Is it used and enforced in a consistent manner?  | yes | no | unsure |